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The High Cost of Shifting Clark

Soon after national security adviser William P. Clark telephoned President Reagan at Camp David Oct. 8 for a Saturday morning briefing on troubled Lebanon, Reagan turned the talk to his burning concern about James Watt and the Interior Department—a change of subject that was shortly to cause alarm for the president's foreign allies and domestic supporters.

"Almost as one," an insider told us, Reagan and his closest friend came to an answer. Nailed down six days later in an Oval Office chat, Clark replaced the fallen Watt, but at high cost. The second turnover of national security advisers in 21 months exhibits presidential disregard not only for the role Clark filled so well but for foreign policy in general.

Reagan's private advice to Clark to "start wearing your Stetson again, Bill" resulted from no conspiratorial power play by Secretary of State George Shultz in his struggle with Clark, though Shultz surely was pleased. Nor did it climax quietly acrimonious relations between Clark and White House Chief of Staff James Baker III, who actually opposed the move as a bad idea.

Instead, it revealed a presidential mindset that bewilders and worries U.S. allies. Their emissaries here were astonished that the point man of Reagan's national security policy could so quickly be sent to a post that, by contrast, is inconsequential.

But the alarm of America's allies was nothing compared to the consternation of Reagan's conservative friends, particularly in the Senate. Still in agony over the Watt affair, such conservatives now perceive a new supremacy for Shultz's State Department, working in league with Baker's West Wingers on arms control and other efforts to soften East-West tensions before the 1984 election.

They are not alone. From the United Nations, U.S. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick quietly passed along concerns that without Clark at the NSC helm, Reagan's tough positions on arms control, Soviet relations and Central America will be submerged under a resurgent Foggy Bottom. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and CIA Director William Casey both registered similar fears with the White House.

Kirkpatrick's concern is ironic. She sent a note to Clark several weeks ago containing an eyebrow-raising suggestion: with Robert McFarlane, Clark's deputy on an open-ended assignment in the Middle East, she might serve the administration better if she left the U.N. and became Clark's deputy. Kirkpatrick's move was quietly in the works when the Watt affair triggered its national security chain reaction.

Republican conservatives mounted an eleventh-hour campaign for Kirkpatrick as Clark's replacement. Clark's sponsorship could have installed Kirkpatrick in the White House, but he decided not to choose between two of his closest associates these past two years.

Kirkpatrick's feisty idiom and trenchant policy positions, though admired enough by Clark for him to want her as his deputy if not successor, are a source of fear in the State Department and West Wing. Shultz, Baker and White House deputy chief of staff Michael Deaver were determined to follow the regular order with McFarlane's succession. They want no part of another strong figure at the NSC who would guarantee more of the disorder that has dogged the administration national security apparatus from the start.

All this could mean faster unraveling

of Reagan's once rock-like foreign policy following Clark's departure from the White House basement. A special presidential directive keeps Clark in the national security loop, but that can never substitute for the lack of his physical presence. As Shultz once remarked privately, "When the president and Bill are in the same room, it's not necessary for them to say many words."

To fix a problem at Interior, Reagan has given up more than he knows. Quiet-spoken Bill Clark is telling his friends that "I've gone wherever he's pointed me ever since '66." But despite his own fatigue and frustration, his trip to Interior is one time he should have flashed a caution light to his chief.

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